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SUBJECT: ASEAN ENVIRONMENT MINSTERS POSITIVE AFTER BRUNEI MEETING ON REGIONAL HAZE PROBLEM

¶1. (U) ASEAN Environment Ministers met in Brunei February 28-March 1 to discuss regional plans to combat haze in advance of the dry season. This year's session had added urgency as the forecast effect of the expected El Nino surface ocean temperature rise could lead to a hot-dry March-August creating conditions for a bad haze season.

¶2. (U) Press reports indicated that the attendees were pleased with actions Indonesia has taken to develop an action plan to deal with the worst hot spots at both the national and local levels. Indonesia's stronger law enforcement efforts and advance planning and budgeting for response efforts were singled out for praise, as was Singapore's assistance to one region to help it develop a master plan.

¶3. (SBU) Minister of Development Pehin Abdullah, who represented Brunei at the ministerial, told Ambassador it had been a productive session. Discussion had centered on controlling seasonal forest fires in Indonesia, the main source for the widespread regional haze (really smoke from burning forests) that reaches as far as Singapore and peninsular Malaysia. There had been some mild criticism of Indonesia's lack of action in the past, but the ministers spent most of their time on practical steps to tackle the problem in the future, such as enforcement of "no-burn" zones.

¶4. (SBU) Abdullah thought that in the long run it would be possible to gain control of the widespread fires. In the short run, however, he expected the problem to continue. The ministers had been briefed that the El Nino effect would probably lead to less than average rainfall for Borneo in 2007. That, in turn, would cause a lowering of the water table under the island's peat swamp forests, drying out the upper layers and making them more prone to catching fire. Such peat swamp forest fires could smolder for months and were almost impossible to extinguish. Moreover, they produced high amounts of particulate emissions. Given climatic conditions, Abdullah expected that forest fires and the resulting haze would return to the region later this year.

FRIEDMAN